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'What the Dead Know' Review: Scenes of the Departed

A candid and blunt-spoken memoir from a former death investigator in New York City's Office of the Chief Medical Examiner.

By [Tom Nolan](#) [Follow](#)

Aug. 31, 2023 6:19 pm ET



PHOTO: GETTY IMAGES

'Once you know the smell of death, you can pick it out in a flower shop. Strangely sweet with a bitter undertone, like a strawberry milkshake made with garlic.' So writes Barbara Butcher in "What the Dead Know," her blunt-spoken and occasionally lyrical memoir of her career as a medicolegal death investigator with New York City's Office of the Chief Medical Examiner.

As an on-site investigator, Ms. Butcher was tasked with gathering facts and evidence for forensics experts. Over the course of her career she learned, among other tasks, how to locate a decomposing body in an abandoned building, how to roll a corpse to examine it from all sides, how to prevent the stench from clinging to the natural fabrics of her clothes. "Check for tooth marks under the lips," one of her early colleagues coached. "That's a pretty sure sign of a hand clamped over someone's mouth and nose."



Barbara Butcher patrols the East River in the late 1990s. PHOTO: BARBARA BUTCHER

Ms. Butcher's determination to succeed at her job—she joined the medical examiner's office as an investigator in 1992 and later rose to chief of staff before retiring in 2015—stemmed from a frequently troubled past. She was born in Brooklyn's Park Slope neighborhood; adolescent depression and substance abuse, she writes, led her to skip college and settle for a job in a Long Island nursing home, where the director steered her toward university training as a physician assistant. "This was probably my first experience of a 'God shot,' " the author says, "that providential moment when a higher power does something unexpected and fortunate."

She later earned a master's in public health, then took up a position as a hospital administrator. "I was happy and fulfilled and in love with a wonderful woman," Ms. Butcher recalls. "But addiction doesn't just go away by itself. . . . I cheated on everyone. I liked being good at things, and I was good at being an addict. I ruined everything." She got fired from her job and kicked out of her apartment. Her brother died of a drug overdose. At the bottom of her downward spiral, she experienced blackouts and considered suicide before a friend got her into a 12-step program.

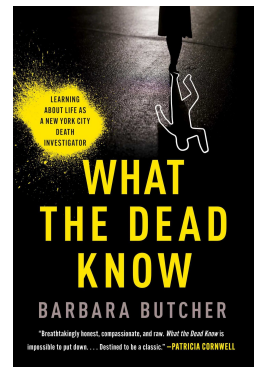
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What the Dead Know: Learning About Life as a New York City Death Investigator

By Barbara Butcher

Simon & Schuster

288 pages



An assignment from the Employment Program for Recovering Alcoholics, she reports, led to an informational interview with the person she thought “had the best job in the city”: Dr. Charles Hirsch, New York City’s chief medical examiner. Time for another God shot: Ms. Butcher was immediately offered a position as a medicolegal investigator. She accepted and privately marveled: “Alcoholism had landed me my dream job!”

Over the years, Ms. Butcher would investigate more than 5,500 deaths and 650 homicides. Some of the incidents she recounts in “What the Dead Know” are downright bizarre. There’s the “death by misadventure” of a 19-year-old who bought a cheap revolver and was showing it off to his friends when it slipped off his finger, fell to the pavement and fired a fatal round between his eyes. “His first shot,” she mordantly quipped to colleagues, “was his best shot was his last shot.” Her gallows humor was met with groans. Then there’s the hoarder who lived and died in an apartment so crammed with trash that police had to remove the front door from its hinges to get in; they found the deceased crushed to death by a landslide of his own making.

Other episodes in the book are spine-chilling. Ms. Butcher describes the grisly spectacle of an adolescent girl found dead in an East Harlem project: “Her small, twisted body partially blackened and charred by fire. . . . She had been suffocated until nearly dead, then burned like yard trash.” The scene was so awful, Ms. Butcher writes, that she walked out onto the building roof: “I prayed . . . that the girl had been dead before she was set on fire, prayed that she didn’t suffer. Prayed that I would stay sober.”

After nine years of such psyche-assaulting experience, she felt herself reaching the end: “I was finding it difficult to keep things going. Friendships. Family. Relationships. The detachment I needed to function on the job leaked through to the rest of my life.” Suicides were especially hard for her, she reports: “I felt those tragedies deeply. . . . This was survival-level pain, and it was eating me up.” She was on the brink of quitting—until the attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, when she had no doubt: “I had to be of use.” The chapters documenting the

author's experience during that apocalyptic day and its aftermath are as harrowing as one might expect.

Ms. Butcher recounts her struggle to stay sober in spite of every temptation her job threw at her. Early in her career as an investigator, she asked a medical examiner who had performed an autopsy on an 8-year-old rape victim how she could stand to do such work. "When you leave here each day," the woman counseled, "surround yourself with things of beauty. Enjoy nature and art and food and music and love. Just do it, and don't skip a day."

The advice helped save Ms. Butcher, both professionally and personally. Her remarkably candid and sensitive memoir reveals how she learned to navigate a heart-wrenching line of work and to overcome her own demons.

Mr. Nolan reviews crime fiction and thrillers for the Journal.

Appeared in the September 1, 2023, print edition as 'Scenes Of the Departed'.